

Duxbury's Postoffices 1800-1989

By the REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

My most recent enthusiasm is Amnesty International. This is the organization that befriends innocent prisoners put away because of opposition to the reigning power. They have to have a record of non-violence and they are usually conscientious objectors of one sort or another. My particular enjoyment is the writing of letters to the heads of state responsible for their incarceration. It really gives me a big lift, for example I addressed a letter to Colonel Omar Khadafy the other day. I felt something of the marvel that an ordinary individual with no axe to grind whatsoever could make a plea for mercy and the release from prison of another human being. Amnesty authorities say, "Don't you think a head of state will be moved in his heart if he receives a hundred letters, say, from plain American citizens who care enough to take a half hour and write a letter? It could trigger the release of an oppressed individual unjustly held behind bars?"

The unwritten message here is the fact of this ability we too often take for granted to communicate in this way clear across the globe thousands of miles away. And for a mere 45 cents perhaps free a person who has been imprisoned for years. It is indeed a marvel, to repeat, that for a paltry few cents we can drop a letter in any mail box and unseen forces will waft it many miles to another person. The last post master general expressed the hope that with present air assistance a letter dropped in the mail today will reach its destination tomorrow anywhere in the continental US.

Postal service began in human history with the organization of nation states and empires. Postal service was regarded as a means of unifying a people, and consolidating its self consciousness as a distinct people. Professor Roger Merriman of the famed Harvard history I course used to call it "consciousness of kind." It was looked upon as a convenience for people who wanted to communicate with one another, but also (and this surprised me) as a means of public opinion control. By regulating the transmission of information in the body politic it was felt the established order had a window on possible subversion. Ancient empires such as China, Egypt, Persia and Rome all had elaborate systems of postal service whose unwritten goal was the nipping of sinister political movements in the bud. As Christians know from St. Paul's epistles, read in his absence in the Christian churches in the early days of the church, the Roman postal service was a real boon to them. It was not only the transmission of these



Bos'n Locker on Washington St. was once a post office. The house next door was the Duxbury Post Office for many years.



The MacFarlane house on High St. was the West Duxbury Post Office.



The Millbrook Post Office is now the Pizza Courier.



MAIL

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Duxbury Clipper

Section 2

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Duxbury's "lifeline" furnishing easy commuter service for the newly-welcomed summer residents. Post offices sprang up wherever neighborhoods had easy access to them. Among these were Millbrook, South Duxbury, Island Creek plus offices in Duxbury village, North Duxbury and West Duxbury. The arrival of the daily mail signaled a neighborhood gathering that constituted a public sharing of family fortunes as the mail brought news of them. Postmasters were confidantes, knowing pretty much all about their patrons lives and spectacular revelations were cause for gossip spreading all over town. I heard a report while I was in the seminary that one morning my father opened his mailbox to a flow of unwanted missiles whereupon he drew on his vast reservoir of biblical phrases until the air was blue around him and others who had come to pick up their mail. Among these was Margie Sampson the town spinster then living at the corner of Powder Point Ave. and King Caesar Rd. Upset by this outburst of eloquent rage she said, "Mr. Merry, you should be ashamed of yourself, you with a son in the ministry." Whereupon it is reported my father replied, "Well, I'd like to know why the hell not!"

We old timers in Duxbury loved our local post offices and depended upon our postmasters as friends and counselors. It would be impossible to say which one of these was most important in the town's life, but I would hazard a guess it was Millbrook. Here across from the Duxbury railroad station reigned 2 outstanding people for many years. Of course the mail and daily papers reached here first and that helped. I remember one day in 1923 picking up the paper there and getting the first news of the Japanese earthquake. I was later to hear personal stories of this tragedy from my students in Hawaii and then I visited the museum containing its artifacts in 1932. The point I am making is that this was the first news in town of the event. It had come by newspaper.

Postmaster here for many years was Herbert Walker, a very distinguished citizen, having been president of the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society for many years and headmaster of Partridge Academy. The postmaster I remember so well was Miss Lizzie Johnston who lived in a house just above the post office. Ethel Hathaway remembers her well and the penny candy store she used to patronize when as a little girl she was sent from her home on Pine Hill to get the mail.

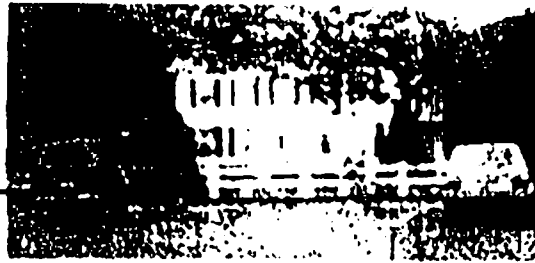
transmission of information in the early days. I felt the established order had a window on possible subversion. Ancient empires such as China, Egypt, Persia and Rome all had elaborate systems of postal service whose unwritten goal was the nipping of sinister political movements in the bud. As Christians know from St. Paul's epistles, read in his absence in the Christian churches in the early days of the church, the Roman postal service was a real boon to them. It was not only the transmission of these epistles but the guarantee that they would not be tampered with. Americans also know that this obligation of government is carried on with fierce adherence to law as tampering with the mails carries serious federal penalties.

In researching areas like this I reap a harvest of new and intriguing information. For example the word "post" and "postal" refers to the earliest times when mail was carried by horse or human courier from one military "post" to the next. My dictionary says this, "Post or postal refers to a series of relay stations along a fixed route furnishing fresh riders and horses for the delivery of mail on horseback." Americans have a very graphic illustration of this in the "pony express" that carried the mail to the far West of the country in pioneering days. Duxbury did not have a pony express but during the earliest Colonial times, mail was deposited in a box nailed to an oak tree at the junction of old Massachusetts Bay Path and 3 King's Highway just off of what is now Route 53, being the main thoroughfare from Plymouth to Boston. At first it was a simple rider on horseback but then it was a stop of the stagecoach which had an overnight stopping place just across the Pembroke line. This coach road was laid out in 1685 and this tree known from earliest times as the "tree of knowledge" was the official mailbox for Duxbury when the mail route was instituted on this road on May 12, 1775. It is marked today by a tercentenary granite slab.

Mail service had begun in England in 1591 by order of the reigning monarch, Queen Elizabeth, when she issued a proclamation prohibiting the carriage of letters except by duly authorized messengers. Cromwell passed a postal act in 1657 centralizing postal service throughout England to "promote trade and prevent many wicked designs against the peace and welfare of the Commonwealth."

In America the Continental Congress established and maintained postal facilities centering in Philadelphia and appointed Benjamin Franklin as its first postmaster General. With the adoption of the Constitution in 1787 postal service became a distinct part of governmental responsibility as an adjunct at first of the Treasury Department. And by 1796 as the fledgling nation it sought to stand on its independent feet as a primary civilizing agent reaching out to the remotest villages and hamlets with the support of the nation. I noted this as I spent 3 summers conducting vacation bible schools in the lonely towns of northern Maine. The only thing that made us aware we were part of America was the post office.

Duxbury's first post office was set up in 1800 with Judah Alden as our first postmaster. As would happen throughout the years the home (now standing at



Dr. Wlemeyer's dental office was the South Duxbury Post Office.



The Island Creek Post Office was in Bennett's Store, the corner of Tremont and Alden streets) was also a store. A new road sign below signifies its early name, "Hounds Ditch." It is remarkable that the detour from the main road that used to run straight from the end of Bow St. took a detour to stop at Judah Alden's store and post office and became what we Duxburyites call "Dead Man's Curve." At the time the detour was made the speed of horses and oxen did not constitute the danger the curve presents to us today. I am indebted to Katherine Pillsbury (our town historian) for this information as well as the fact that in the early days mail was paid for at its beginning, as we now do with parcel post. Stamps were not used until 1847.

Mail was carried everywhere by stagecoach in these days. It was much later that rail transportation became the common carrier. People in Duxbury were oriented toward the sea, and sailing and boating in general. So although there is no documentation on this point, I like to think that the Packet which made weekly and semi-weekly runs from Plymouth to Boston stopped at Bourne's wharf in the Duck Hill area where we know it carried dignitaries to be met by horse-drawn carriages in 1852 for Daniel Webster's funeral. And Gurnet was a prosperous dairy farm of 80 acres with hotels and boarding houses and bars and dance halls, the playground of Plymouth. I can't but believe the Packet took mail and passengers from there to Boston as it did from the Standish Hotel on Standish Shore. But this is only my conjecture; it may not be factual.

The railroads were "allowed in" to Duxbury in 1871 to provide transportation for the 10,000 or so people who came for the laying of the cornerstone for the Myles Standish monument. It quickly became

president of the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society for many years and headmaster of Partridge Academy. The postmaster I remember so well was Miss Lizzie Johnston who lived in a house just above the post office. Ethel Hathaway remembers her well and the penny candy store she used to patronize when as a little girl she was sent from her home on Pine Hill to get the mail.

As the railroads were the principal carriers of mail in the early days delivery of mail depended on their speed and efficiency. It was a vast improvement over the stagecoach, but judged by today's standards it was very slow, taking perhaps a week to cross the continent. Major trains tying our large cities together included usually a "railway express mail car" among its components. Here specially trained postal clerks would work at sorting mail as the train moved from city to city. A parishioner of mine in Pittsburgh worked at this job, boarding the train at midnight en route to Chicago for example and working all the rest of the night sorting out the mail. Today with the use of trucks and air mail express plus the use of zip codes mail delivery is much faster. And instead of 6 local post offices all over town we now have 9 rural postal delivery routes. The ancient rule of the postal service, restricting delivery to one mile from the office still applies today and many people in Duxbury prefer to get their mail delivered in this way. It was to make the distinction between home delivery and office that the recent change was made in Duxbury from zip code 02331 to 02332 indicating this choice.

I spoke with John Powderly about his job in the Duxbury office. He has lived here in Duxbury for 12 years and he and his wife love the town. I asked him about the exact disposition of the letter I wrote to Colonel Khadafy of Libya and he hesitated to make a detailed reply knowing about the difficult relations between our 2 countries. The first stop for the letter would be Brockton and from there it would go by truck to the Logan Airport facility and overseas to Europe. He was not clear what country would be receiving it for transmission to Libya. My own conjecture is that short of outright hostilities like a declared war, as in most other similar situations, it would go through. Whether Khadafy himself would ever actually see the letter is of course a question. Political fortunes and responses depend on many things and one never knows. I heard a former governor of New Jersey say on reporting his activities during his term of office that the first thing he did was visit the county jails of the state. He found that they had for all intents and purposes become old men's nursing homes. Most inmates had been there many years, long after anyone could remember why they were there, and no one felt he had the authority to release them, short of a governor's pardon. This he proceeded to do and he felt it was the greatest achievement of his governorship.

So often just a kind word or even a gesture can unlock the hardest heart. I hope this will be the case with Omar Khadafy and I am grateful to the mail system of the world that makes it possible for me to stretch out a friendly hand in this way.